



Christian Coalition

Capitol Hill Office

March 18, 1997

The Honorable Ernest Istook
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ernest,

Thank you for taking the lead in sponsoring the Religious Freedom Constitutional Amendment. The Christian Coalition fully supports your bill.

The right to free speech is one of the most highly revered and protected rights in our Constitution. The Supreme Court has censored free speech in only three areas: inciting violence and insurrection, obscenity, and religious free speech. It is absurd for the Supreme Court to equate people expressing their faith in God with the same standard as pornography and overthrowing the government.

Your amendment contains the three cornerstones of religious freedom that must be included in this effort.

School prayer - Your amendment allows children to say voluntary prayers in the school setting, so long as those prayers are initiated and composed by the students, and not compelled or coerced by a teacher, principal, or other school official. This protection is most important for students who practice a religion that most other students in the school do not practice. This amendment guarantees that such a child has a right to say his or her version of a prayer to God.

Support for this provision has remained incredibly high in public opinion polls. Between two thirds and three quarters of the American people have supported this right for over 30 years. Your amendment will lead to the first House vote on this issue in over 20 years. Christian Coalition members and other people of faith are eagerly awaiting that moment.

Protection against religious discrimination - Sadly, since the original school prayer Supreme Court rulings, the scope of the problem has now gotten much worse. A series of more recent rulings by the courts has further eroded the free speech rights of people of faith. A minister was prevented from giving an invocation at a graduation ceremony -- even when the students themselves requested it. Another court upheld a teacher giving a young student named Brittany Settle an "F" on a research paper, simply because the girl decided to write her paper about Jesus. This problem has been compounded by a pervasive chilling effect. School and government officials are banning: bibles on desks, religious t-shirts, the use of the word "God" by

valedictorians, and even a Valentine written to Jesus. Only the threat of legal action, and sometimes legal action itself, is allowing these forms of religious free speech to occur.

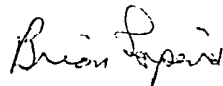
Your amendment would also protect against discrimination when government programs are involved. Faith based drug rehabilitation programs, for example, have achieved high success rates, yet some want to prohibit them from receiving federal grants. Even using school vouchers to send high school students to religious schools has been attacked. This is a curious argument, since Pell grants have never been attacked. A Pell grant is nothing more than a voucher that can be used by a college student to go to Notre Dame, Yeshiva University, Southern Methodist University, or any other college. Challenging government programs is a relatively recent problem. While a strong and winning case can still be made against religious discrimination, there has been some erosion of religious freedom, necessitating clarification on this point in your amendment.

Acknowledging America's rich religious heritage on public property - When our country was founded, a clear and unmistakable decision was made that this new country would acknowledge the watchful hand of God from the outset. Many statements from our founding fathers, indeed the Declaration of Independence itself, confirms that acknowledgment that we are "one nation, under God" is essential to what it means to be called American.

This is another unsettled area of the law that has seem some erosion. "In God We Trust" on coins and opening congressional sessions with prayer have not been challenged. However, displaying cheches and menorahs on courthouse steps, and allowing the Ten Commandments to be displayed in courtrooms have been challenged.

We appreciate your leadership on this issue. We are encouraged by the fact that Speaker Gingrich and Judiciary Chairman Hyde are also supporting your amendment. We, at the Christian Coalition, will work hard to secure its passage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Brian Lopina".

Brian Lopina
Director
Governmental Affairs Office